

Out of the Bag

Understand the causes of kitty stress, and help lower anxiety

BY JACKSON A. THOMAS

A day in the life: Long, luxurious catnaps throughout the day; a little petting action whenever you need an itch scratched; and some playtime with your favorite toys. Sounds like a perfect day, doesn't it?

It's the life of a cat. But even though this seems like an ideal setup for felines, pet owners need to take cat stress seriously, says Dr. Cindy Houlihan, of The

Cat Practice in Birmingham, Mich. Just as we wig out about things in our lives, cats stress out for many of the same reasons. The savviest cat lovers need to understand why their tabby gets anxious, to spot common red flags and keep them stress-free.

QUICK TIP

Schedule playtime with your cat twice a day, even for 10 to 15 minutes, because it makes a huge difference in lowering their stress levels.

TERRITORIAL TABBY-CATS

Cats tend to do their own thing. But even the most laid-back cat will not cope well with change. "Cats love things that are so routine-oriented. That's how they feel safe," Houlihan says. "They like everything to be around the same time, in the same way. Changes in their environment, such as moving their food dish to a different location, can be very upsetting."

Making substantial changes in a cat's environment, such as rearranging furniture or bringing home a new baby, can cause stress and even devastating effects, she says. "Their house is their den, their everything," Houlihan says. "When someone new comes in, they feel like their safety is threatened."

Houlihan says cats have strong instincts when it comes protecting their territory. "They're

very much animals in that regard. Their instincts dictate their safety," she says. "It comes down to the fight or flight reaction. Some cats internalize those feelings, and it manifests itself as stress."

PAIN AND PERSONALITY

People can express how they feel when they're in pain, but a cat's faint meow isn't always an attention-grabber. It may not be obvious what's bothering them. Medical conditions, such as arthritis, diabetes and urinary disorders, are common stressors, says Houlihan.

"Internal stress causes an emotional reaction because some cats get more concerned when they aren't feeling well," she says.

A cat's personality affects how well it handles physical stress, Houlihan says. Just like people, some cope better than others. "Some cats ride with it, where others are really sensitive. They pick up more on things around them. They take in the changes more," she says. "They feel every part of it, and they get scared."

PUT YOURSELF IN ITS PAWS

Some cats lose their locks when stressed, but don't pull out your own hair. You can help your cat regrow its fur. "Once medical conditions are ruled out, take a look at your cat's environment, but from their point-of-view," Houlihan says. "You have to imagine you'd never leave the house, and what their day is like. Look at their normal patterns, and reflect back."

Environmental enrichments help a cat's overall well-being, Houlihan says. She says scheduled playtime twice a day, even for 10 to 15 minutes, makes a huge difference in lowering their stress levels.

"Cats learn to count on that playtime. It gives them comfort and security in knowing they'll have that," she says. "The key is to figure out what type of play your cats like, and be consistent with it."

SHARPEN YOUR CAT EYES

Be watchful for changes in behavior, because some signs of stress can be extremely subtle. Houlihan recommends a visit to the vet if you notice some strange behaviors, especially if your cat:

- Isn't as interactive as it used to be
- Sleeps more than usual
- Changes its grooming habits (over-grooming or under-grooming)
- Urine marks or sprays around the house
- Has bowel movements outside the litter box
- Becomes destructive (knocks things over, or chews up toilet paper)